

Guiding Youth to Church Membership

Prepared by
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ISSUED BY THE BOARDS OF EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL SERVICE
AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Suggestions as to Purpose, Problems,
Personnel and Follow-up of Training
Classes for those in Preparation for
Membership in full Communion in the
Christian Church

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Guiding Youth to Church Membership

The Christian Church has one of its supreme opportunities for intensive and extensive effort to-day in the realm of youth. By far the most fruitful ground for recruiting church membership is in the Sunday School. When, under competent leadership, young people at the most impressionable period of their experience are led, by perfectly normal and educationally sound methods, to the unfolding of their natures and to an understanding of God's will, their "forward step" into full communion in the church will stand out in a memorable and wholly satisfying way—one for which they may always be thankful.

To focus the influences for good that have been released in the Christian home and through the Sunday School and preaching services of the church, and to guide young people to an intelligent understanding of Jesus and His principles of living is a task worthy of the best that any minister or Christian worker could give. For an invitation to consider these most important matters of fellowship, faith and life thousands of young people, boys and girls within and without the Church at present are waiting expectantly.

A Church Membership Training Class conducted with certain definite and adequate aims in view, adapted to the conditions obtaining in any church or community where it is needed, may provide the avenue of approach and become a channel of blessing to numbers who may be guided to loyal, enthusiastic and meaningful participation in the church's enterprises. Through them we may build for the future, as Jesus did.

The Purpose of the Class

The purpose of a Church Membership Class will not be merely to enlarge the membership roll of the con-

gregation and to present a better report when statistical returns are made, though of course a living church may be expected to show an increase along these lines annually. It should not be considered a part of a more or less mechanical and formal duty, to be performed when the time comes round, a sort of fixed process through which persons must go in order to be ready for such a step.

A Church Membership Training Class is the opportunity to clarify the knowledge of young people as their outlook enlarges and as their experience grows. It is the privilege of one charged with the responsibilities of leadership to unfold God's plan and desire for His children, not simply through the exposition of facts from the Bible or from creeds but through the more intimate processes that are established when one shares with others in the normal development through which they may pass. It means the increasing of happiness and inspiration to those who have advanced to the point where they desire to go forward definitely and of their own choice to identify themselves with the family of God. It offers to one, in return for thoughtful, prayerful, conscientious effort, the joy of the harvester in the garden of the Lord.

Practical Problems

Experience in conducting Church Membership Training Classes suggests that these are most successfully held in most congregations twice a year, one commencing at the end of October or early November leading up to a December Communion, and the other in the spring just prior to the Easter Communion.

To cover the material which should have consideration in such a class, a minimum of six sessions is required. It seems to be better to plan the course so that it may be covered in six weeks—for which period interest may be held successfully—rather than to extend it over a longer time when interest may flag and weariness result. It is most important that the arrangements be timed so that, whenever the classes begin or however long they continue, they should end during the week or on the Sunday just

prior to the day on which the Communion Services are held.

In some congregations it may be possible to conduct these special classes on a week day, arranging a time convenient to the members. Some very good classes have been conducted on Friday afternoons immediately after school; some others on Monday evenings between 7 and 8 o'clock. If it is possible to secure the attendance of the members of the class for one-half to three-quarters of an hour on Sunday, there are very many obvious advantages that one will find in having the Sunday meeting.

The attendance of members for such a class may be secured by pulpit or calendar announcements, by communications with parents and by the co-operation of members of Session, but perhaps the most fruitful method is through the Sunday School. By intimate touch with the leaders of Intermediate, Senior and Young People's Departments and by frequent suggestions to the boys and girls themselves the class may soon establish its position and claim its place. It should not be necessary to exert any pressure to secure attendance, but rather it should come to be regarded as a privilege that is offered, one that the young people will not want to neglect. Constant vigilance on the part of the minister or Sunday School Superintendent or teacher will provide a growing list of individuals eligible for membership and interested in such a class, and these should be personally invited when the sessions begin.

It is always helpful to call into conference teachers, officers and leaders of young people concerned and to enlist their co-operation, that, by personal visitation in the home, by intimate conversation with boys, girls and young people who should be interested they may secure their attendance at a Training Class. Possibly the group as a whole may decide to go with their teacher. The earnest, prayerful co-operation of every young people's leader is of invaluable assistance to the group and to the minister in the important undertakings committed to him.

Once having secured an enrolment of the class, it is

the duty of the leader to establish such a spirit of fellowship and earnest desire and freedom that regularity will result and the members become keen to continue to the end of the course.

Many who undertake the leadership of such a course will feel that the time is so short and the material to be covered so far-reaching and important that it will be necessary to prepare very carefully and deliver without interruption the lectures to be given. But one needs to use the lecture method with great care. Spontaneity and eager expectancy on the part of the members are essential and they must feel free to raise their questions and difficulties and to present their points of view as these arise. One who is wise will have his carefully prepared material well in hand and will know beyond the slightest possibility of doubt or hesitancy the ends and objects to be attained in the group, but he will make sure that as he moves forward the members of the class are with him.

The name of the class is not unimportant. To call it an "Instruction Class" places the minister or leader at a distance from the members in a way that one would not desire to have. To call it a "Communicants' Class" suggests something more formidable than one would desire and seems to pre-suppose a fixed routine through which individuals must go to attain a standard. To call it a "Church Membership Training Class" (a name admittedly not one hundred per cent. satisfactory, but the best we have been able to find) means to suggest a process of investigation, preparation and leadership that will lead when the time is ripe, though not necessarily at the end of the particular course, to a decision and the profession of faith. Members who have come up through the Sunday School and from the Christian home are invited to attend such a class in order that they may have opportunity to know what is involved in the next step when they are ready to take it in their Christian experience.

Personnel of the Class

It is most important that each class be constituted carefully so that a congenial and homogeneous group

may result. It is usually not desirable to mix adults and youth in a single group, but as a rule better to secure two groups or more in which each student may feel comfortable and free. It is not well to allow too great a diversity of ages in the classes for the boys and girls. For the most part it will be found that children under twelve cannot satisfactorily appreciate the full meaning of the step they might take following such a class and the presence of younger children under twelve may have an undesirable effect upon those for whom it is primarily arranged. Sometimes a class may not have more than five or six members, but with that number it may be well worth while. In general it would seem that the most successful class is one of twelve to twenty members, whether adult or youth.

There is apparently a real need for the adult class in many congregations. Its membership may include not merely those who are not members in full communion but others who after some experience in the membership of the church desire to review and re-consider their relationship, that firmer foundations may result.

There is to be found in most communities a challenge to reach out for the all-too-large numbers of persons who are not being reached by the regular services of the Church—those who by reason of misunderstanding or error or indifference have become separated from the ministry and service which the Church can provide. The approach of the communion season may offer repeated opportunities for the minister to invite enquirers and seekers after truth to a series of discussions adapted to their needs. To enrol and hold these persons in a Training Class means usually to win them for Christ and His Church.

It is quite clear that in each community or congregation there must be given careful consideration to the needs and opportunities that are to be found, but the success of a class is assuredly greater when attention is given to three requirements: (1) That the members are of nearly uniform age; (2) That the members are of similar intellectual attainment, not too divergent in their ability to participate and follow the discussions;

(3) That there be a measure of congeniality in each group from the outset, that all may feel that they have something in common with the other members who share in the privileges of the class.

The Course

The range of truth applicable to such an opportunity is so great that one would not think of limiting the possibilities that ministers or leaders of training classes may see in the outline of a course to be followed in a Church Membership Training Class. Conditions vary so greatly in different communities and the approach of the leader may be such that similar results may be obtained through widely different curricula.

The writer has found, in conducting classes of this type for a number of years, a general outline which has produced encouraging results. This has been printed in a brief series of six studies entitled "Climbing Life's High Way,"* intended to suggest some of the ground that may be covered in a brief course and how the most essential matters may be brought to the attention of a group. The title chosen is suggested by the familiar lines of Oxenham:

"To every soul there openeth
A way and ways and a way,
And the high soul climbs the high way
And the low soul gropes the low,
And in between on the misty flats
The rest drift to and fro.
But to every soul there openeth
A high way and a low,
And every one decideth
The way his soul shall go."

Briefly, in following this course one endeavors to introduce the problem in the first study, to show the importance of the choice that each must make and to make clear the invitation of Jesus to those who having been received into the Church through the Sacrament of Baptism and having attained to "years of discretion" should be ready for the next step. Foundations are

*Ryerson Press, Toronto.

thus laid for the second study in which the class is taken through a consideration in outline of the "Larger Experiences of God" which have developed in the course of His revelation. This leads, in the third study, to a consideration of God's supreme revelation in Jesus and of the place of His Church in the Kingdom plan. The fourth study presents an interpretation of the Sacraments in the Church. The fifth study deals with practical and positive suggestions for the first Communion—how to prepare for it, how to participate in it and what to expect after it. The final study deals with "The Larger Outlook" endeavoring to impress the fact that the profession of one's faith and entrance into the church membership is not the end but the beginning of a new and larger experience, into which must enter certain constructive influences and which must be guided by very definite motives if these are to be truly Christian.

It has been found of great advantage to have in the hands of the young people a mimeographed or printed outline similar to that provided in the little pamphlet accompanying the leader's book. Such an outline is not merely a great time-saver, but valuable to the leader in opening up the subjects which must be dealt with in limited time. Certain questions are dealt with before they arise and in this way the members of the group are enabled to see the general line of discussion that they are to follow. As it opens up they may fill in the notes mentally or otherwise which they are inclined to make, and the inexpensive pamphlet becomes very valuable to the individual as a record of progress and for purposes of review.

For young people between twelve and twenty, the questions which follow the outlines have been found useful. They help to summarize the material covered in class. They call forth an effort which in many cases would not be put forth if these were not given and work upon them expected. They serve to correct any wrong impressions which an individual might take from the class presentation. Obviously these questions must be regarded not as exercises for home work, to be done

under stress, but as a further service which the leader may offer to the members for their profit if they wish to avail themselves of what he is thus able to provide.

Following Up the Course

When the regular course has been completed it will be found that it has been in many cases just the start of a new series of opportunities. A brief statement from the minister or leader of the class at the closing session should suggest the necessity and value of personal, individual interviews on the part of those who are looking forward to church membership, ample time being set aside definitely to receive those who wish to enquire further.

One may be prepared for surprises, not only as to the number who will avail themselves of this privilege, but as to the keenness of their questions and the general high quality of their response. Sometimes misunderstandings will have to be cleared away, but very often there will be revealed a measure of enthusiasm and a depth of penetration on the part of youth that will be most gratifying. Often there will be raised personal doubts or difficulties, perplexities as to future career or some issue upon which guidance can be given. Always there is the privilege of the personal welcome and the expression of one's happiness in receiving individually those who have been led to this point.

THE RECEPTION SERVICE is an important factor in the follow-up. Wherever it is possible, this should have a large place in the service preparatory to the Communion, the members of the congregation present sharing in the warmth of the welcome given to new members in such a way that those who come forward to the communion for the first time will realize that they are entering more definitely into this very real Christian fellowship.

Following Up the New Members

Let all who have to do with this important task of training for Church Membership be clear in their own minds on this point and let us make it clear beyond the

slightest possibility of misunderstanding to the new member that THE STEP FORWARD TO CHURCH MEMBERSHIP, A NATURAL NORMAL STEP, IS NOT THE END OF THE PROCESS, BUT THE BEGINNING OF A NEW AND LARGER ENTERPRISE. The transaction is not done, though from the standpoint of God's invitation and our individual acceptance, a new start or a new beginning has been made. The purposes of the individual are now turned to higher levels and they should be kept looking forward to still greater things. The congregation, on the other hand, must be made to see the need of keeping a warm atmosphere of brotherhood and fellowship about those who come into its membership. They must feel more positively than any words can express the welcome which as God's people they need to give.

The six periods of the Training Class and the personal interview with the minister which follows should open the door so positively that whenever there is need of counsel and intimate guidance on any life problems the new member will feel not only free but impelled toward the one who can be a true guide, counsellor and friend, and one who is ready to receive requests even though these seem sometimes rather trivial or small.

Clearly every new member should find in his own church a sphere of useful service. There is work for all to do according to the capacities and talents which God has given to each. The working force of the congregation should be ready to receive the new recruits and to give them further opportunities for expression. Many of the joys of Christian experience and of membership in the Christian Church find expression in the earnest desire to win others and to bring them to the knowledge of the salvation experienced through Jesus our Risen and Living Lord.

The Gospel records tell us significantly that Jesus gathered about Him a little company of followers. They came to Him for instruction. He told them what they should do. But more, He imparted a Spirit which assured them of success. Mark records that on one occasion after they had been out on a specific mission

some of these followers returned to the Master and "told Him all things whatsoever they had done, and whatsoever they had taught." Doubtless many things appeared in new perspective as they came into His presence. Things that looked very big would then seem very small. Things that perhaps they regarded as trivial He saw to be most significant. They called forth His approval and blessing.

So with us, and with those whom we may call into the great work of the Kingdom and its extension. What is done may be done very awkwardly and quite inadequately, but if there is behind it the very best mental and spiritual energy we can command, and a spirit of true humility, love and truth, it will not fail to evoke the Master's blessing.

The Church Membership Training Class is a means to a great end. It fulfills its high purpose when, making possible opportunities that do not otherwise arise, it leads some of God's children to see more clearly the way forward and calls them to a fellowship into which they in turn may win others for the glory of God and the progress of souls for whom Christ lived and died and lives forevermore.

